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ABSTRACT

The need for research on academic freedom as it applies to the K-12 level is addressed. The existing literature in the area of academic freedom, while often critical, rhetorical, and prescriptive, never calls for research. Indeed, there are very few examples of research in this area. Two separate ERIC (Educational Research Information Center) database searches were conducted. Only five research-based articles on academic freedom were found. The following questions are submitted as ones whose answers are fundamental to improving academic freedom policies and practices in support of citizenship education: (1) What conditions in schools and school districts contribute to an environment that supports the study of controversial issues? and (2) What conditions in schools and school districts contribute to the successful resolution of protest cases? The use of naturalistic inquiry in the area of academic freedom and controversial issues at the K-12 level is advocated. Included in the two appendices are interviews with two secondary social studies teachers. (BZ)

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Academic Freedom: A Call for Research

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November, 1986

With special thanks to Mr. Larry Oswalt, doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction for his able assistance and library research

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Let me start with a few facts. Between 1980 and 1984 the following novels were the focus of community protest:

1.	Catcher in the Rye	16 times
2.	Of Mice and Men	14 times
3.	Grapes of Wrath	10 times
4.	Huck Finn	8 times

I could go on. Thanks to the efforts of Ken Donelson, (1) NCTE, English teachers and librarians are aware of which books drew the most attention. Donelson is able to build on previous surveys, as far back as 1963, to discern patterns that identify the nature of the books being attacked over time. For example, he is able to conclude that there has been a marked decline in protests over books with minority themes (Down These Mean Streets, Black Boy, Soul on Ice). Notably, he is also informed enough to know that this condition is related more to reduced use of these books in schools than it is to a higher level of tolerance among protesting groups.

For most of us in colleges and universities, academic freedom is a compelling value. We know it lies at the very foundation of the academy. If you, like I, know of university faculty members, who have been subject to in-class observations by representatives of Accuracy in Academia, you know the sense of utter alarm such surveillance signals. As social studies educators concerned in large measure with fostering the intellectual strength of citizens, we need to be just as concerned with the climate for learning at the K-12 level. The study of controversial issues, the free exchange of ideas in classrooms, exposure to partisan speakers - none of these exist without a supportive environment where intellectual freedom is valued.

This paper addresses the need for research on academic freedom as it applies to the K-12 level. As I planned this paper, I realized I would have very little to say if I talked about protests that impact social studies classrooms - for they seem to either be very few in number or they are unreported. Parenthetically, I might add that I think this fact in itself may signal a serious concern. On the one hand we could conclude that social studies teachers are adept at handling controversy and consequently protests are not warranted. On the other hand, we could conclude that social studies teachers may be avoiding all things controversial and are clinging to the bland, simplified coverage offered by textbooks. The latter explanation, I fear, is more likely.

The literature that does exist in the area of academic freedom can be characterized as follows:

1. It is replete with rhetoric, with calls to arms, with accounts of significant censorship cases and of procedures for handling controversy.

2. It is often critical - of teachers who avoid controversy, of principals who are too responsive to community pressures, or school boards who are too conservative.

3. It calls for teacher training and for more dynamic text materials

4. It condemns the protesters.

While some of this is appropriate, even needed, the literature never calls for research and indeed, there are very few examples of research that address this area.

To bolster my case, I conducted two separate Eric Probes to identify research concerning academic freedom and controversial issues across the last few years. I did not confine my search to the social studies. I assumed that research related to librarians, English teachers, science teachers and the like could inform the social studies as well. To make a long story short, I found five articles that were, in any sense of the term, research-based.

One article surveyed and compared ASCD and NCSS members about the issues they viewed as most important for the curriculum. (2)

Another article (3) surveyed English teachers and librarians to establish which books were the focus of protesters' efforts. This is the Donelson study, mentioned earlier, which revealed that books with minority issues were receiving less attention than previously and pointed out that young adult literature along with some classic literature (Of Mice and Men, Lord of the Flies) had taken on greater prominence to the protesters.

A third article (4) reported on a social studies textbook analysis for grades 8-12 that examined the presentation of four themes: propaganda, US-Latin American relations, the Vietnam War and nuclear war. In brief, the conclusions were:

Propaganda receives its greatest emphasis in U.S. History textbooks, not in others. Examples of propaganda are drawn from totalitarian, not democratic nations.

Treatment of Latin America avoids discussion of cultures, minimizes Latin American hostility to the U.S. and generally ignores controversial areas. However, nearly all textbooks offered some criticism of U.S. policies.

Treatment of Vietnam emphasized military and political considerations, avoided controversies such as My Lai, the use of chemical warfare and the hawk-dove debate. Some texts included anti-war protests.

Treatment of Nuclear War focused on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings but not on their effects. Limited attention was given to arms talks and to overkill problems.

Basically the results confirm that the textbooks did not serve as adequate resources for the study of controversial issues. For the most part they were bland descriptions that, by omission or commission, cast the United States in a favorable light.

The fourth article (5) discussed the effects of a college course for inservice teachers on controversial issues. The course focused on the identification, selection and analysis of an issue as well as classroom application. In a follow-up survey about half or more of the partcipants who responded continued to support the teaching of controversial issues, felt competent to teach such issues and increased the amount of time spent teaching controversial topics. Beyond providing a syllabus, this study does not identify the dynamics that may have contributed to the effectiveness of the course. The low return rate weakened the study, but it may still offer a glimmer of hope that teacher education can make a difference.

The last article (6) presented the results of interviews with 14 junior and senior high shool humanities and science teachers and 9 school specialists in Australia. The results demonstrate that teachers do use classroom time for controverial issues but few teachers are subversive and few are prepared to risk censure. Teachers maximize risks by adopting a pro and con approach. And finally, teachers do not take issue with the soundness of textbooks.

It seems reasonable to assume that for the most part these results apply to the U.S. context as well.

Here we have it. The results of five years of scholarship tells us:

1. how some educators rank order the important issues for classroom study

2. how the nature of protest efforts has shifted with respect to literature used in high schools

3. that social studies textbooks avoid the controversial

4. a teacher education course may have made a difference supporting the teaching of controversial issues

5. that in another English speaking democracy, teachers treat controversial issues but are somewhat gun-shy and like U.S. teachers, they are textbook dependent.

While each of these studies is useful, all of these studies, taken together represent only token acknowledgement of academic freedom and controversial issues as research areas. Most importantly we can begin to define questions that need answering if the study of controversial issues is to be nourished by a supportive environment. I would like to submit the following questions as ones whose answers are fundamental to improving academic freedom policies and practices in support of citizenship education.

1. What conditions in schools and school districts contribute to an environment that supports the study of controversial issues?

2. What conditions in schools and school districts contribute to the successful resolution of protest cases?

These two questions and their answers are undoubtedly intertwined. The first question calls for an examination of schools where the study of controversy is valued and nourished. The second calls for an examination of schools where protests have occurred.

Both questions call for a purposive rather than a random selection of schools. Futhermore, neither question can be adequately answered by survey data alone. Surveys elicit terse responses that permit no followup and no interaction with the repondant. Answers cannot be probed for elaboration. Neither can they be clarified. In short, the usefulness or credibility of survey data is quite limited. If a survey question asks teachers to indicate if they have ever been subject to protest, they can only answer tersely, yes or no. The survey can ask the teacher to elaborate, but again the answer will be limited to the fewest words

possible. By contrast, a well conducted interview can elicit elaboration, examples and interpretation.

Beyond the use of interviews, these questions call for observation and even participant-observation. Working in a school for several weeks, observing classrooms, making classroom presentations on controversial topics, inteviewing teachers, students, parents, the principal, represent important ways through which one can gain a comprehensive view of the school climate.

The result of such investigations can take the form of case studies, hopefully in substantial number, from which we can begin to understand what factors are involved in a supportive school climate. While case studies are not generalizable, they are, when carefully conducted, believable. Furthermore, we can learn from them. Readers can easily determine the extent to which they apply to their situation.

In short, we cannot study the conditions surrounding academic freedom at a distance. Rather, we must be on-site, we must establish trustworthy relationships with our respondants and we must permit them to verify our observations and our interviews.

In the two appendices attached to this paper are interviews I conducted with two social studies teachers from the local schools in my community.

In the course of these interviews, both of these teachers revealed that they had a grasp of the meaning of academic freedom in the school setting along with an awareness of how to handle controversial issues. Both had experienced parent protests and were able to elaborate at some length. Furthermore, both felt comfortable that they would receive support from the principal, central office and the teacher association.

While the interviews allowed for a productive dialogue they did not permit me to verify the claim that these teachers dealt with controversial issues. Only classroom observation combined with a review of course outlines would have been helpful. Finally, once the interviews were in typed form each respondant was asked to verify them and correct any distortions.

What I am advocating here is the use of naturalistic inquiry to help us answer these vital questions. Experimental designs and survey data are not likely to be especially productive with respect to this kind of research. They would reduce what is a complex whole riddled with a myriad of human motives and interactions to isolated factors and

simplistic, terse responses that would not yield the depth of meaning necessary for the questions at hand.

Most importantly I am advocating the pursuit of research in the area of academic freedom and controversial issues at the K-12 level. Since the study of controversial issues is critical to the preparation of citizens and academic freedom is necessary to that study, then the questions identified earlier, questions that are begging for answers, should play a significant part in our research agenda.

1. Donelson, Ken. "Almost 12 Years of Book Protests . . . Now What" School Library Journal. v. 31, no 7, March, 1985, pp. 93-8.

2. Molmar, Alan. "Are the Issues Studied in School the Important Issues Facing Humankind?" Social Education. May 1983, pp. 305-7.

3. Donelson. op. cit.

4. Fleming, Dan P. "The Treatment of Peace and Security Issues in Social Studies Textbooks." Unpublished paper. June 1984.

5. Guyton, Edith and Hoffman, Alan J. "Teaching Controversial Issues in Social Studies." Unpublished paper, CUFA, November, 1983. 31 p.

6. Rice, Alan. "After Bureaucracy, What? An Australian Case Study". Urban Education. v. 18, no. 1, April, 1983, pp. 40-58.

Appendix A

Teacher A

Level: High School

Subjects: Anthropology, US History

Years of Experience: 13

Q. What does academic freedom mean to you?

A. Academic freedom applies to students as well as teachers. For students, academic freedom implies having choices in what they learn. For example, it was students in this high school, who encouraged the school to develop the Anthropology elective I now teach. While a course proposal had to be developed and passed through the proper committees, these things could and did happen and the course was approved.

Academic freedom for students is found in the availability of choices among available courses by students. In addition, students should be able to study what they perceive to be important. In a course with gifted and talented students, I suggest topics as do the students. Together, we work out requirements and expectations. However, all topics must have the teacher's approval.

For teachers, academic freedom means the right to present new perspectives on topics under study.

Q. In order to have a syllabus approved is it necessary to deemphasize controversial issues?

A. Yes, it is necessary to look at the political implications to get something passed. It is also important to include attention to various sides of controversial topics.

Q. Do students ever object to specific topics?

A. When students express different views in the Anthropology courses, some of which reflect their religious beliefs, I try to get them to think about the particular culture and its framework of values.

Q. What about parents? Any objections from them?

A. In nine years I have been asked on two occasions to provide alternative assignments. I have never asked students to deal with an area of study that they find totally wrong. But the chances of students or parents objecting to Anthropology, which is an elective, are not great.

I also had a parent object to teaching about the Soviet Union, particularly the Communist Manifesto. The principal asked for my lesson plans, objectives and unit outcomes. The issue also went to the School Board. I was supported by both my principal and the Board. I made it clear that I was not engaging in indoctrination but rather emphasizing that reading the Manifesto was basic for understanding the economic structure of the Soviet Union. I was supported because I knew why I was teaching the material.

Q. What guidelines do you feel should guide the selection of instructional materials and textbooks?

A. Parents and teachers need to be involved in textbook selection. A balanced set of materials, reflecting alternate points of view, should accompany controversial issues. Contrasting viewpoints help students practice critical thinking skills.

For example, in US History, I bring in the women's perspective as an alternate view of history.

Q. What individuals and groups influence what teachers do?

A. School Boards, by setting policy. Also, the Director of Secondary Education requests a folder for each course that includes the syllabus and supplementary materials. These folders are available for public review. Other teachers have influence as well. In my department we challenge each other regularly to topics, how much time we spend on them, etc. Although a few teachers may feel pressured by this process, it is a healthy dialogue in my view.

Parents also have input, though not decision-making power. In this community, parents have lobbied successfully for a gifted and talented program.

Q. Let's assume a school principal told you you must not treat a particular topic or use certain materials. What do you think you would do?

A. I would pursue two avenues. The Director of Education and my teacher association. I would have confidence in both of these and would be especially confident in using both. If I was challenged on a topic or materials directly related to my course, I would pursue it. Furthermore, I wouldn't feel I was risking being fired. The administration here is very supportive. Just recently, the school administration compiled a list of speakers for and against the local PCB issue for classroom use.

However, if parents object, I believe their youngsters are entitled to alternative assignments. As a teacher in a public shcool, I have an obligation to the public.

Teacher B

Grade Level: 7

Subject: Social Studies

Years of Experience: 5

Q. What does academic freedom mean to you?

A. I think it means freedom of the teacher to teach what he/she thinks is valuable to the students without the influence of pressure groups and parents. It is also the freedom of students to learn a variety of information. If students are interested in a topic related to a course such as AIDS for example, the teacher should be willing to treat the topic. Furthermore, teachers need to present all points of view. Otherwise they deny their students' academic freedom.

Q. Have you had any experience with parents expressing concern over what or how you were teaching?

A. One incident, several years ago, centered around teaching about different religions rather than focusing on Christianity. The parent discussed the matter with me. I explained what I was doing and the incident stopped there. I continued teaching the curriculum which focused on the Asian-African area. Also, last year a student for the school newspaper, which I help sponsor, wrote an editorial about President Reagan that was not complimentary. A parent complained and the principal talked to her. The incident stopped there.

Q. If a parent had been insistent that his/her child be given a different assignment or permitted to leave the classroom how would you have responded?

A. I would have talked to the principal. I probably would have agreed to give their child another assignment as long as that didn't influence the other students in the class.

Q. Do parents in your view, have the right to remove their children from instruction that they find objectionable?

A. They have that right with their own children but they do not have the right to control what happens in the classroom. I also believe the teacher should follow the curriculum for purposes of articulation. Within that curriculum, the teacher has a responsibility to present all points of view, or they are denying their students academic freedom.

Q. What guidelines should teachers follow in handling controversial issues?

A. Teachers need to decide if students are mature enough to handle the topic. Secondly, notifying parents that particular topics will be discussed. Notes can be sent hope to parents and they can be given the option of whether their student should attend class. Furthermore, the teacher has the responsibility of presenting all points of view related to a particular topic.

Q. Do you feel that parents have an influence on what is taught?

A. When this school first opened a group of parents wanted to track students academically. These were parents of better students who felt their youngsters were left behind. But, I don't know of any examples where parents were motivated by either political or religious views. I do know that the community seems to be Republican but that doesn't influence teaching about political parties. However, I would never discuss politics from a partisan point of view.

Q. What about your fellow teachers? Do they have an influence on what you teach?

A. No, they don't have any influence. In fact, they don't even know what I am teaching.

Q. What about students?

A. Only in the skills I emphasize, not the content. Few seventh graders have developed strong interest in particular topics.

Q. Do you handle topics that could be viewed as controversial?

A. Teaching about China and about communism can be controversial. It was harder to teach about China when the country was seen as anti-West.

Q. You've already said you've only had one parental complaint. How would you explain the fact there hasn't been more criticism?

A. First of all, most students don't go home and discuss what they've learned. Secondly, as I said, China is no longer viewed as a hot topic.

Q. Would you anticipate any difficulty if you invited a Chinese Visiting Scholar, a Communist - to talk to your class?

A. No, I don't think so. It would be great to have such a visitor.

Q. If you felt your principal was not supporting your position with respect to a parental concern, where would you turn?

A. Perhaps, to another teacher and definitely to the teacher association.

Q. Do you feel you could count on their support?

A. I think so.